



City of Rockville

MEMORANDUM

February 24, 2010

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Planning Commission

SUBJECT: Recommendation on Parks, Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Plan

The Planning Commission reviewed the draft Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan (PROS Plan) at January 13 and January 27, 2010 work sessions with the purpose of assembling comments and formulating a recommendation on adoption of the Plan as a policy document to the Mayor and Council. On February 24, 2010, the Planning Commission voted (5-0) to approve recommending the PROS Plan as a policy document that will set overall direction in terms of goals and objectives for parks and recreation in the City of Rockville for the next twenty years.

The Planning Commission acknowledges that the Plan is an important element toward achieving the City's vision of providing high quality parks, recreation and open space and commends the excellent public outreach that has occurred throughout the process of completing the draft. The timing of this report is opportune, providing analytic detail and forward looking direction to inform ongoing new ordinance matters or upcoming Master Plan review. The Planning Commission forwards a positive recommendation on the draft Plan but does request that the Mayor and Council give consideration to the following specific comments and suggested modifications to the draft Plan that emerged during the work sessions:

- 1) The cost of acquiring land for parks is a big challenge for the future. It is suggested that the payment a developer would make in place of providing public use space as specified by the zoning ordinance (25.17.01d), known as the "fee in lieu", should be kept high enough for it to be a real source for parkland acquisition. The fee charged on a project should be comparable to the actual costs of acquiring parkland in the parts of the City where the development is occurring, since land costs vary depending on specific location.
- 2) The PROS Plan should be more proactive in its recommendations by including potential locations for open space, including pocket parks, in neighborhoods that are determined to

be underserved (such as East Rockville and Twinbrook) and strategies for acquiring them. The upcoming revision of the Comprehensive Plan also may offer an opportunity to identify sites throughout the City that would be appropriate for acquisition of parkland using, in part, funds collected in lieu of open space.

- 3) Strengthen statements that RedGate will remain a PROS resource, even if it stops operating as a golf course.
- 4) Observe that storm water management (SWM) facilities and PROS space can co-exist beneficially when sufficient design focus is placed on the amenity character of the SWM water feature in the PROS setting. However, with population growth putting pressure on limited supply of PROS space, diminishing usable PROS space by occupying it with SWM should be weighed carefully.
- 5) Widen the gap between resident and non-resident fee structures. Rockville residents already support Recreation and Parks with their taxes so non-residents should be expected to pay the full cost of their participation. Many programs seem to fill quickly with non-resident registration, indicating that non-resident fees could be increased.
- 6) Fees for some facilities, specifically community center party rooms, may be high relative to comparable private facility rental options for events such as childrens' birthday parties. Therefore, these rooms (Twinbrook Community Center was cited as an example) may not be utilized as much as they could be. Lower fees for community rooms in neighborhoods may make them more financially accessible to local residents and increase usage. Increased usage can also serve as a form of marketing (by increasing word-of-mouth, etc.) that may further increase demand for facility rentals.
- 7) PROS marketing should be targeted to underused facilities and programs rather than those that are already at or over capacity. Do not market to groups that we know, through surveys and other data, are unlikely to respond to efforts.
- 8) The City's recreational facilities and programs should complement those that are already offered by private enterprise, rather than competing with the private sector. The private sector provides valuable recreational services and choices that, to some extent, can reduce what the City needs to provide and thereby help to reduce public costs.
- 9) Provide wide-ranging and alternative recreational opportunities that are sought by Rockville's demographically and culturally diverse population.
- 10) More indoor open play space is needed, especially for children in the wintertime.
- 11) The City should explore partnering with local civic associations, garden groups, etc. to help maintain smaller neighborhood parks and thereby help defray maintenance costs. There have been successful examples of citizen groups supporting park maintenance in

the past (such as the College Gardens Garden Club and Twinbrook Citizens Association) and the City may want to encourage more volunteer assistance.

- 12) Community gardens are a PROS resource that warrants supply/demand analysis to determine if there will be a need for more in the future. The City also may want to allow residents to have the option to rent the same plots year-round so that they can be continuously maintained.
- 13) Emission control of City-operated lawn mowers and sensitivity to other environmental aspects of park maintenance should be encouraged.
- 14) Bicycle and pedestrian lanes/infrastructure in the Rockville Pike Corridor should be counted as contributing to the Complete Streets concept rather than as park or open space. Need to decide what is really considered public use space in different (urban v. suburban) parts of the City. Linear bike and pedestrian paths should count only if they are located within a larger scheme of open space.
- 15) The concept of pathway marking (yellow brick road idea at the bottom of page 5-6) for wayfinding is an excellent alternative to increasing sign clutter.
- 16) In addition to promoting bicycle and pedestrian access, minimize the impacts of parking and vehicular access to Citywide facilities on surrounding neighborhoods by analyzing alternatives that would be less disruptive (such as providing access to the Senior Center from Gude Drive).

Comments on Plan Analysis and Organization

- 17) The Executive Summary should be reduced in length.
- 18) The pool of cities chosen to illustrate “best practices” in Chapter 4 should be limited to providing programmatic examples that Rockville can learn from and consider implementing. Following best practices from places of innovation is good. However, direct comparisons between these cities and Rockville should not be made (e.g. top of page 4-25 and Table 4-2) as they are very different from Rockville in terms of population size, geographic location, and other characteristics.
- 19) The railroad right-of-way is a more logical division between the east and west halves of the City than Rockville Pike because it is a more formidable physical boundary and it makes more sense to use it for analysis from a planning perspective. The PROS Plan understandably uses the Pike because it matches the division used in the City’s biannual citizen surveys. The City should consider changing the boundary used in the survey and in future plans, even if it is too late to change it for the PROS Plan. (The PROS Plan recognizes the railroad tracks as a barrier to access to PROS facilities in its walking distance analysis on page 4-21 and does support using this boundary for analysis.)

- 20) Add population of east, west and central sections of Rockville from Table 3-1 to tables 4-7 and 4-8 that show PROS resources by City slice.
- 21) Figure 4-6 on page 4-24 could be more meaningful and visually clear if areas that are not residential are blocked out (such as the Tower Oaks business area) and if PROS resources outside of, but adjacent to City boundaries, are included. The map would then better focus on truly underserved areas.
- 22) The Chapter 5 introductory statement on page 5-4 that “The greatest need is in central and east Rockville” warrants more precision. Qualify further as “The greatest need is in the east, portions of central Rockville, and Rockville Pike.” Much of the central portion is served well. Only isolated areas exhibit this need. The bald statement, as summary, does not stand scrutiny.

It is anticipated that the key policy components of the PROS Plan will be recommended for adoption into the Comprehensive Master Plan (CMP) later in 2010, when other CMP elements are added or revised according to the public review process outlined in Article 66B. On October 12, 2009, as part of the review of the City’s CMP, the Mayor and Council included the PROS Plan in the set of items that would be addressed during Phase I revisions of the CMP. Therefore, if the Mayor and Council approve the PROS Plan as a policy document, staff will return to the Planning Commission to recommend appropriate amendments to the CMP that would incorporate PROS policies. These amendments would be done in conjunction with other CMP changes, such as those planned for the State required Municipal Growth and Water Resources Elements.

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